Woodstock was never like this

Reading Festival report by Harry Doherty. Pictures: Barry Plummer

THERE are 30,000 people in Britain with better complexions today, as a result of the special mud-pack offer inclusive in the £7.95 three-day ticket at Reading Festival last weekend. Can you now say Reading doesn't give value for money?

To confirm that the torrential rain last week left the festival site in poor condition would be an understatement of the greatest proportions.

On Friday and Saturday, with occasional showers and threatening clouds forever looming, the arena was literally a swamp of mud, unbelievably deep in some places. Sunday marked the arrival of a hot sun but this only slightly alleviated the discomfort.

About the only thing not dampened by the conditions was the enthusiasm of the fans. Without sounding pretentious, one can only have admiration for the positive atmosphere generated out front.

How would you like to stand, sit, sleep and dance in muck for three days? The idea is about as appealing as a fortnight at Butlin's, right? Well, this crowd treated it like a weekend in Majorca; laughed, cavorted and generally made the fun.

They even showed the ultimate in good taste by pelting **Wayne County's Electric Chairs** off the stage on Sunday afternoon. Now it may be argued that Wayne and his/her boys/girls weren't given much of a break by the audience and that the mud was making a bee-line for the stage before they even got on; but the kids knew what they wanted, and Wayne certainly wasn't their notion of entertainment.

The Electric Chairs came on after **Racing Cars,** as contrasting a combination as you'll ever find, and had managed to flit through four numbers (classics such as "Nighttime," "Cream In My Jeans," "Bad In Bed" and "If You Don't Want To Fuck Me, Baby, Fuck Off") and were just about to commit sacrilege to "Fade Away" when Wayne decided he'd had enough mud-slinging and took his leave. Not before saying hello to a slab of dirt tossed from the front row, though.

"I was at Woodstock and this never happened," Wayne moaned. One up for Reading. The cheer that greeted the Electric Chairs departure was among the loudest of the weekend.

Some will say that it was a reaction by traditional hard rockers against punk rock. No way. Every new wave band on the bill was given a fair hearing and hearty response. This was simply a judgement of what is, and what is not, good music.

That was the only nasty spot of the weekend, although **Blue** could very well have earned the same reaction from the audience with their antics. When the audience didn't cheer loud enough, or, in some cases, cheer at all, a few of the band decided to splutter a few childish insults.

They're a fine tight band and eventually they did win a measure of applause (with the help of Elton John on piano for the last number), but I don't need to be told to slap them on the back after every number. 1984's still a long way off.

I've also got to say that the sound could have been better. I spent the latter half of Sunday outfront, about halfway down the arena, and the sound varied from atrocious to poor to fair, and was good only during **Frankie Miller's** excellent set.

During the **Sensational Alex Harvey Band** set, the sound was so low that it was like listening to a tinny transistor in another room. After the opening with "Faith Healer," half the crowd pleaded "up, up." Nobody paid any attention, so over 10,000 kids were barely able to hear the band they had stood all day for.

There is another unfortunate affair at festivals which I would like to refer to. I've been told that many support bands are only given half-power to work on so that the main acts' sound is much more impressive. I'd believe that.

For instance, the sound level between **Hawkwind** and the **Doobie Brothers,** who succeeded them, was so different that you had no trouble telling that someone switched a knob up. It was the difference between mono and stereo.

As always, it's the kids who lost out. If I had paid almost eight green sheets to hear eight bands at half-power or whatever and three at full, I'd feel very cheated. But there you go; bands and managements seem to have accepted that these things happen and are unwilling to rock the boat.

Not that those complaints stopped us getting off on the music. Undoubtedly it was one of the best Reading line-ups in years, a solid string of bands, both of established and rising talent, with the inevitable sprinkling of turkeys slotted in to test the endurance.

Indifferent

Personally, I was disappointed that the audience didn't respond more enthusiastically to the **Motors,** one of a couple of new wave bands who will bounce through in the next couple of months. **John Peel,** compere and another avid follower of the band, was as puzzled as me why the punters were so indifferent. Perhaps the fact that it was one o'clock in the afternoon had something to do with it.

"Being a Liverpool supporter," an exasperated Peelie revealed afterwards, "I'm very romantic, and when I get so enthusiastic I expected the audience to jump to their feet and go crazy."

Talking of Peel, I have to comment on his extraordinary rapport with the audience, reflected in the presentation to a balding gent of a tee-shirt which carried the timeless message: "John Peel Is A A C—".

Brutal

Peelie's brutal wit had neccessary employment, especially after the Friday set by **Five Hand Reel,** another of his favourite bands, when he bluntly hollered at the audience: "Come on, you bastards, CLAP. This is like a Young Conservatives' disco." And any deejay that plays "Nellie The Elephant" — and gets away with it — has got to have something (I wonder what).

ANOTHER of the new bands who stole a bit of glory at Reading were **Lone Star,** who, with the **Rods,** helped to make Friday night worth the effort of attending. The band have at last got their stage set together, with a really tight sound. Guitarists **Paul Chapman** and **Tony Smith** are swiftly becoming an exceptionally sharp team, while the overall sound for the first time does total credit to the band's records.

I still have my doubts, though, about new young singer, **John Sloman.** He's got a good voice, but all that Robert Plant-lookalike posing, strikes an off-note.

Friday and Sunday were slightly disappointing. On Sunday, especially, I expected a lot more. It was an anti-climax after a tremendous Saturday.

The Electric Chairs I've already told you about, and as I mentioned, too, the Motors deserved more. They are definitely new-wave-influenced, but accessible enough for a far wider audience. In many ways they remind me of Status Quo, going for that same killer rhythm section and crushing vocals, though with a bit more melody.

In a short set they featured most of the material from their first album (available soon on Virgin). Songs like "Dancin' The Night Away", "Freeze", "Phoney Heaven" and "Summertime Is Calling" are very potent pieces of rock and roll.

The Motors — **Nick Garvey** (guitar), **Bram Tchaikovsky** (guitar), **Andy McMaster** (bass), and **Ricky Slaughter** (drums); all sing — are still learning to communicate with audiences, but they write red hot material.

Hard-rock band **Quartz** opened Sunday's proceedings, and played riff-laden stuff with absolutely no originality. I thought that Tiger, a band that features **Big Jim Sullivan** on guitar, **Percy Jones** on bass, and **Simon Phillips** on drums, would have got the adrenalin going, but they proved too self-indulgent, always going to C to get from A to B. Would it be terrible to suggest that Sullivan is a trifle overated? No.

Then there was the **Enid,** and that band, with their holier-than-holy, more English-than-bowler-hats approach bewilders me. They played a set of what I considered to be boring, keyboard-orientated music (very impressively, too, I might add) and went down the proverbial storm. A standard ovation at 3 pm. It's unheard of. They were supposed to be just padding.

Intimacy

The big disappointment of the day were Racing Cars. I've watched the Cars grow in the past year and liked their first album, "Downtown Tonight", but at Reading they did nothing to show they have progressed in 12 months.

Their music is all on one level; though. Morty, their singer, is a prolific writer, I get the feeling that he isn't using his best material; but none of the new material (from "Weekend Rendezvous") offered optimism.

Racing Cars are more suited to indoor venues, where Morty's affable intimacy gilds their music.

Hawkwind preceded the big three — the **Doobie Brothers,** Frankie Miller and Alex Harvey. As usual for me, the Skyhawks were a visual experience that was moronic and extremely tedious.

The Doobies were pleasant, and won loud applause, but did anyone stop to think that they were living mostly on past glories by still encoring with "Listen To The Music"? Good players, but they don't half drag things out.

IF I had to choose between Frankie Miller and the Sensational Alex Harvey Band for the best gig of the day, Miller would have to win hands down. Fronting a new band, Frankie gave an extremely raunchy performance, beautifully exploiting the full potential of that raspy vocal. "Be Good To Yourself" and "Cool In Love" were particularly appealing.

Harvey and band, of course, had the added hassle of poor sound. Even so, he did enough to demonstrate that he is back with a theatrical vengeance, especially on "Framed", where, complete with cross and Roman Centurion, he acted out Christ's Passion through the medium of rock and roll. It's an amazing interpretation.

There was a pile of old material in the set, with "Vambo" ringing out as fresh as ever. But isn't his new single, "Mrs Blackhouse", a little bit too much like Brian May's "'39"?

FRIDAY was as duff as we suspected. Of the three bill-toppers — **Golden Earring,** the **Rods** and **Uriah Heep** — only the Rods impressed one as being in tune with '77. Earring summarised their own situation by concluding with "Radar Love", a song five years old, while Heep, as well as they did go down, continue to epitomise the brash, loud heavy metal syndrome.

But where is it leading? For all I knew, Earring and Heep could have stepped out of the Tardis and onto the Reading stage, carried there through time from the late Sixties.

The Rods, however, demonstrated an energy which the other bill-toppers lacked. **Graeme Douglas,** ex-**Kursaal Flyer,** has helped give their music a purpose by taking it down a gear or two.

Prowess

Barrie Masters, too, is a much more capable front man than I imagined him to be, confidently pouting around, **demanding** attention. I'll tell you how good they were: it rained and I didn't even notice.

Five Hand Reel were competent, but a little predictable and out of their depth. Kingfish, too, displayed admirable musical prowess, yet had little personality.

Woody Woodmansey's U-Boat played the longest set of the festival, for two-and-a-half months, it seemed. **That** bad. I've rarely heard such a disorganised band. **Salt** are solid blues and rock, the perfect bar band, and I'm afraid I missed **Staa Marx** (traffic problems).

AND on to Saturday, which turned out to be a feast of good music. The day started off fairly slowly, with **Gloria Mundi,** one of three new-wave bands on the bill, goddamned awful, followed by **Krazy Kats,** an inoffensive pop band who seem capable of better.

No Dice came across as sub-standard Jam, but occasionally the material was interesting, so I'd keep an eye on them in the future. **George Hatcher,** playing only the third gig with his new band, ran through a bitching rock and roll set, leaving me wondering why the hell United Artists dropped him. Somebody sign him! Quick. **Ultravox** were pretty abysmal. Pretending to be new wave.

That's that lot out of the way. On to more important matters. The **Little River Band,** from Australia, led the run-in to Saturday's climax with some neatly played, arranged and sung music, but I still can't help thinking of them as the poor man's Eagles.

Their good set, however, was nothing compared to that played by the **John Miles Band,** one of the best of the entire festival. Miles is still criminally underestimated, but is growing steadily as a singer, writer and guitarist. No joking, this guy could live with any guitarist you care to name.

And when you hear material with such depth as "Manhattan Skyline", "Pull The Damned Thing Down" and "Stand Up And Give Me A Reason", you realise that he is not bound by the format of hit singles.

Aerosmith were on a hiding to nothing at Reading. So big in the States, so tiny in Britain. Though they did nothing at the festival to merit breaking through here, I was surprised at their firm grasp of r&b, particularly on the encore "Toys." But that doesn't hide the fact that they are mere imitators of the Stones, and who needs imitators? America, obviously.

I mean, Aerosmith were forgotten as soon as **Graham Parker and the Rumour** played one number. Parker's new set was well documented in last week's review of Dublin and the material from the forthcoming album sounded superb. Parker and his band swing like no other British band.

A pity the encore, "Hold Back The Night," was fouled up by the p.a. packing in, but the crowd didn't mind, singing along and helping GP out.

Diversity

On to **Lizzy,** who also played Dublin. It has their night, and as far as this audience was concerned they could do no wrong, despite the atrocious sound on the openers "Soldier Of Fortune" and "Jailbreak". The band played well, but this was by no means their finest hour.

For one thing, the set doesn't sound right to me. It pulls too much off the past three albums, "Bad Reputation," "Johnny The Fox" and "Jailbreak", and ignores some of the better material off earlier albums. Songs like "It's Only Money", "Suicide" and particularly "Wild One" should have a place in Lizzy's current live set.

The present collection seems too predictably geared to suiting the fans, a "let's play the ones they know" attitude, so that there is sometimes repetition — with "Emerald," and "Massacre," and "Baby Drives Me Crazy" and "Me And The Boys," for instance. This set does not do the diversity of Thin Lizzy justice. Lizzy must be careful that their own reputation does not overtake them.

Dynamics

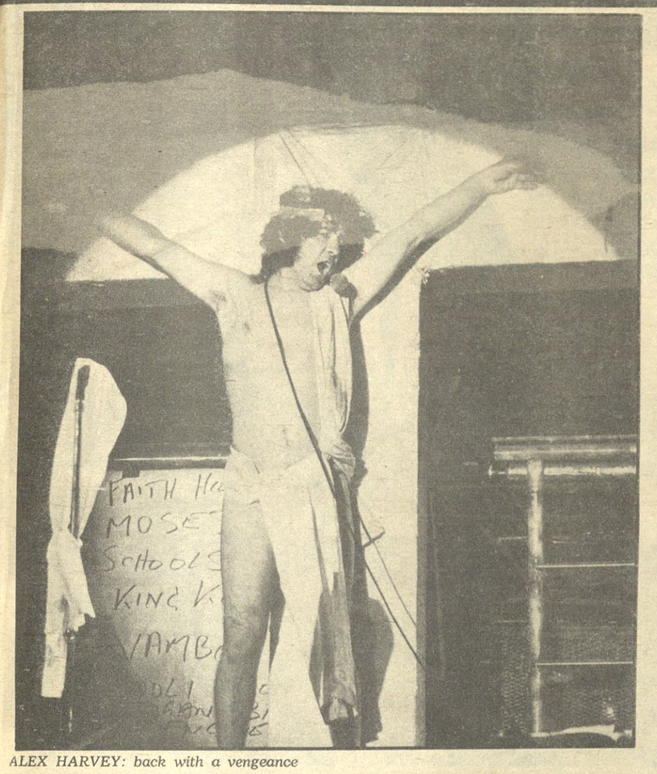
But Lizzy will survive this imbalance for the present because they are primarily a live band, one of the best in the world. They know how to operate dynamics, as on the link between "Cowboy Song" and "The Boys Are Back" and the climax of "Me And The Boys". It was a fitting end to a good day's rock. Lizzy in heat are untouchable and they were moving furiously by the climax.

Well, it's over for another year. There are moments to savour, from Wayne County's eviction to Lizzy's triumph. Despite the mud and rain, I reckon it was worth ruining two pairs of jeans and one pair of shoes.

THIN LIZZY: by no means their finest hour

LONE STAR: stole some thunder/mud, slide, slime at Reading

Wayne County



ALEX HARVEY: back with a vengeance

AEROSMITH: mere imitators of the Stones/ELTON JOHN: playing the piano for Blue/THE RODS: demand attention